WH - Weiss

Does Empathy Guide or Hinder Moral Action?

After a year of intense elections, violence in protests, terrorism and war, the term “empathy” has been [cited](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/07/opinion/glenn-beck-empathy-for-black-lives-matter.html) [by](http://fortune.com/2016/11/11/facebook-election-fake-news-mark-zuckerberg/) [many](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/09/jobs/conflict-at-work-empathy-can-smooth-ruffled-feathers.html) as a key component to helping groups of people that have little in common, or disagree, come together. But does empathy actually increase the ability of opposing parties to understand each other better?

**EMPATHY:**  the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and [vicariously](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vicarious) experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively [explicit](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/explicit) manner;

**COMPASSION**: sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others

Below are two different perspectives on the topic (See bio’s below). Please read the entire debate as each respond to each other and offer their respective points and perspectives.

**YOUR TASK:** Please provide ONE Socratic response to the entire debate (500-750 words).

You must highlight a minimum of the following in your response:

* 4 points you agree with and why.
* 4 points you disagree with and why.
* Your own response to the question, Does Empathy Guide or Hinder Moral Action?
  + This can reference points made by either of the other sources if you would like, but does not need to.
* 500-750 words.

**DEBATERS**:

*JAMIL ZAKI*

[Jamil Zaki](https://psychology.stanford.edu/node/2177), an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford University, is the lab director of the [Stanford Social Neuroscience Laboratory](http://ssnl.stanford.edu/people) and founder of [The People's Science](http://thepeoplesscience.org/#home).

*PAUL BLOOM*

[Paul Bloom](http://campuspress.yale.edu/paulbloom/), the Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Yale University, is the author, most recently, of "[Against Empathy](https://www.amazon.com/Against-Empathy-Case-Rational-Compassion/dp/0062339338): The Case for Rational Compassion."

### Empathy Can Lead to Short-Sighted and Unfair Moral Bias

PAUL BLOOM

What does it take to be a good person? What makes someone a good doctor, therapist or parent? What guides policy-makers to make wise and moral decisions?

Many believe that empathy — the capacity to experience the feelings of others, and particularly others’ suffering — is essential to all of these roles. I argue that this is a mistake, often a tragic one.

Empathy acts like a spotlight, focusing one's attention on a single individual in the here and now. This can have positive effects, but it can also lead to short-sighted and unfair moral actions. And it is subject to bias — both laboratory studies and anecdotal experiences [show](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/311336015_Empathy_and_Its_Discontents) that empathy flows most for those who look like us, who are attractive and who are non-threatening and familiar.

When we appreciate that skin color does not determine who we should care about, for example, or that a crisis such as climate change has great significance — even though it is an abstract threat — we are transcending empathy. A good policy maker makes decisions using reason, aspiring toward the sort of fairness and impartiality empathy doesn't provide.

Empathy isn’t just a reflex, of course. We can choose to empathize and stir empathy for others. But this flexibility can be a curse. Our empathy can be exploited by others.  
  
For those in the helping professions, compassion and understanding are critically important. But not empathy — feeling the suffering of others too acutely leads to exhaustion, burnout and ineffective work. No good therapist is awash with anxiety when working with an anxious patient. Some distance is required. The essayist Leslie Jamison has a great description of this, in writing about a good doctor who helped her: “His calmness didn’t make me feel  abandoned, it made me feel secure," she wrote. "I wanted to look at him  and see the opposite of my fear, not its echo.”     
  
Or consider a parent dealing with a teenager who is panicked because she left her homework to the last minute. It’s hardly good parenting to panic along with her. Good parents care for their children and understand them, but don’t necessarily absorb their suffering.   
  
Rationality alone isn’t enough to be a good person; you also need some sort of motivation. But compassion — caring for others without feeling their pain — does the trick quite nicely. Empathy and compassion are distinct: Recent neuroscience studies, including some fascinating work on the [power of meditation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256075736_Meditation_Increases_Compassionate_Response_to_Suffering), show that compassion is [distinct](http://www.cell.com/current-biology/fulltext/S0960-9822(14)00770-2) from empathy, with all its benefits and few of its costs.

Many of life’s deepest pleasures, such as engagement with novels, movies and television, require empathic connection. Empathy has its place. But when it comes to being a good person, there are better alternatives.

### Moral Wisdom Requires Empathy

JAMIL ZAKI

Paul, you aptly point out the perils of relying on empathy. But you also overstate its problems and undersell its importance.

For one thing, you are sparring against a straw version of “empathy.” Encountering an upset friend, one might vicariously share his feelings, understand where those feelings come from and wish for him to feel better. All of these experiences are pieces of empathy, but you have thinned out the definition to only include its emotion-sharing component. This is like arguing that European food isn't delicious, but first defining “European food” strictly as haggis.

You also describe emotions as volatile and irrational. This perspective is dated, harkening back to the Greek notion that people must subdue their passions through reason, like a rider on a wild horse. But in fact people [workwith](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1047840X.2014.940781), not against, their feelings, turning them up or down to suit their needs. Empathy is no different. Yes, it’s an emotional spotlight, but people have the ability to point this spotlight as they see fit. My own research demonstrates that when people simply believe empathy is under their control, they are inspired to [try harder at it](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/psp/107/3/475/) — for example, in paying attention to the emotions of people who differ from them ethically or politically.

Why bother working with empathy if we can better ourselves through principle alone, as you argue? Because empathy makes a difference — not always, but more than you suggest. It helps to receive empathy. For example, cancer patients experience less depression and more empowerment when their physicians [express empathy](http://www.nature.com/bjc/journal/v88/n5/abs/6600798a.html). It also helps to give it: People who behave kindly grow happier and healthier, most of all when they act [out of empathy](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4516598/).

Those who [choose empathy](https://www.edge.org/conversation/jamil_zaki-choosing-empathy) grow a broader, richer emotional life.

And it helps to be around it, because empathy, even toward one person, can [jumpstart human care](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9008376) for larger groups. Many Americans opposed slavery before 1852, but "Uncle Tom’s Cabin," in shedding light on its horrors, moved millions and sparked a new momentum for abolitionism. In cases like this, empathy enlivens moral principles, making them urgent.

Of course, Paul, you're right that people do dole out empathy lazily — to others who look or think like them — or cynically, to spark aggression. But enshrining pure logic to guide morality is naïve. Even when people try to be objective, they [often confirm](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/bul/108/3/480/) what they want to believe. In our [post-truth](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/16/arts/post-truth-defeats-alt-right-as-oxfords-word-of-the-year.html) world, people can use reason like a shield, curling up in comfortable assumptions, surrounding themselves with others who amplify their biases. If people don’t want to broaden their empathy, they’ll probably use reason narrowly as well.

No piece of human psychology is always good or bad, and arguing for or against empathy makes no more sense than arguing for memory or against attention. Instead, we should motivate people to align empathy with their sense of what is right.

Moral wisdom requires bringing together the force of emotion and the precision of principle, not splitting them apart.

### There Is a Difference between Empathy and Compassion

PAUL BLOOM

Jamil, I worry about your lumping together some very different psychological processes — such as feeling, understanding and motivation — when you talk about "empathy." For one thing, it means we’re talking past each other. To use your analogy, it’s as if I wrote a book “Against Haggis” and you responded by citing papers showing how Scottish salmon is good for the heart.

My usage of the terms is pretty typical; there are many scientists and philosophers and laypeople who [define](http://www.cell.com/current-biology/abstract/S0960-9822(14)00770-2?_returnURL=http%3A%2F%2Flinkinghub.elsevier.com%2Fretrieve%2Fpii%2FS0960982214007702%3Fshowall%3Dtrue) "empathy" and "compassion" exactly the same way I do. More important, there are many who believe the empathy — in the sense of feeling others' feelings — really is central to being a good person.

I believe there is a marked difference between empathy and compassion. And when you lump them together, you leave less room for the richness of moral psychology and make it harder to properly explain the phenomena you discuss.

Exactly what was it about "Uncle Tom’s Cabin" that had such a positive social effect? Precisely what is it that doctors are doing that is making their patients less depressed? When you say humans do better when we “harness empathy,” are you talking about feeling, understanding, motivation — or some specific combination of all three?

I do agree with you that emotions have mixed effects. Lust can be terrific, but certainly not for doctors doing medical exams. Similarly, empathy can be wonderful — empathic engagement is central to the enjoyment of fiction, for instance — but it has serious design flaws, such as bias and narrowness, that render it a poor guide to being a good person. To the extent that we need an emotional push, we’re better off with compassion.

Finally, you note that humans can do poorly when it comes to reasoned deliberation. I agree — but the solution is not to listen to our hearts, to fall sway to our biases and prejudices. Rather it is to reason better, often with the help of other people, to explore arguments and counter-arguments, considering various examples and so on.

After all, isn’t this what we are doing right now?

### Emotion and Reason Are Inextricably Intertwined

JAMIL ZAKI

You accuse me of lumping, and I plead guilty. But in this case lumping is realistic, because empathy does mean more than one thing: It includes sharing, thinking about, and caring for others’ inner lives.

Scientists can differentiate between these “pieces” of empathy, for instance, because they [activate different systems](http://ssnl.stanford.edu/download/file/fid/519) in the brain. But just because two things can be separated doesn’t mean they are always or even usually neatly divided. To continue our food fight: People can tell the difference between chickpeas and olive oil, but real world empathy is more like hummus — blended, often for the better.

For instance, brain systems that are involved in *both*sharing and thinking about emotions allow people to insightfully [understand](http://ssnl.stanford.edu/download/file/fid/538) what others feel. And in psychological research, the most tried and true way to ramp one's “compassion" is through “cognitive empathy,” i.e. by asking people to consider others’ point of view.

Which piece of empathy, then, provides the best push toward goodness? It depends. Someone who has just seen a police shooting video doesn’t need another emotional punch in the gut, but could leverage his feelings to better understand the perspective of communities of color. Someone who reads devastating statistics about Yemeni refugees might also watch [evocative videos](http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/11/msf-refugees-empathy-exhibit/506780/) of their plight, hijacking her emotional empathy to inspire action.

I agree that compassion has strengths, and emotional empathy has weaknesses. But neither is a poor guide to being a good person, and neither is a moral cure-all. This might seem lumpy to you, Paul, but splitting these emotions is too simplistic.

Emotion and reason are also intertwined. People constantly think themselves into and out of feelings. Strong emotions can act like a psychological alarm system, drawing our consciousness toward whatever causes them. In the best cases, emotions *help* us reason better, by forcing us to consider new points of view.

Emotion is woven into the fabric of our minds and that's a good thing. Although feelings alone don’t make us good people, they are key ingredients in our moral lives.